Transculturation and the Cuban Stew: Fernando Ortiz's Concepts of National Identity and Cultural Interaction

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Abstract

Fernando Ortiz Fernández is perhaps more commonly known for being the first Cuban intellectual in the twentieth century to consider Afro-Cuban culture worthy of study. His writings on Afro-Cuban culture, which continued up to the mid-1950s, are widely recognised today as having been central to the formation of Afro-Cuban studies. However, an even more important contribution of his work was his thought on Cuban national identity. From about 1928 until 1940, a considerable proportion of the intellectual’s critical output was concerned with elaborating definitions of the nation as culturally hybrid. His concept of 'transculturation' and his definition of Cuba as an 'ajiaco', a traditional Cuban stew, have become a central element of definitions of Cuban identity in Cuban nationalist discourse as a mulatto composite. This paper will describe these two concepts and explore some of their problematic and productive elements. The analysis will be based on an assessment of Ortiz's writings on blacks and Afro-Cuban culture. The paper will also include a brief discussion on the extent of Ortiz's contribution to current debates on the hybridity or heterogeneity of Latin American cultures.